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Spirit of Life Unitarian Fellowship
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IT'S EARTH DAY. PAY ATTENTION!

“What the kangaroo and the koala are to Earth,
we are to the universe... The secrets of the universe
are not different from us”
(*Paul Fleischman*)

In a couple of weeks time two celebrations will occur.

One is the Christian festival called Easter.

A time when the life and death of a Jewish peasant sage called Yeshu'a, is remembered.

Jesus' death mattered to the early storytellers, but only because his life mattered more.

And about the cross we can say: for many of the earliest Christians,

the cross was about the integrity of Jesus, not about a sacrifice or a divine plan.

As a result of the recent religion-led protests surrounding the artwork entitled 'McJesus'
which displayed a crucified Roland McDonald, it has become necessary

to unpack some of the traditional baggage that has encased the cross in church history.

So let me be clear: the positioning of the cross of Jesus as the sacred centre of Christianity
was not central to the earliest Christian communities.

It has only occurred since the Middle Ages,
when it became the object of worship.

As a result the symbolism of 'McJesus' - as making a point about capitalism
and asking us to think about how we have, or whether we have,

placed consumerism above the value of life (*David Galston 2019*) -
was all but lost, due to anti-intellectual piety
propped up by fear and religious superstition.

There are good and bad ways to think about Jesus

and part of the job of the progressive biblical scholar is to identify
how concepts of Jesus have been used destructively.

The second celebration is a more recent one - Earth Day.

Indeed, the 49th anniversary of what many consider the birth
of the modern environment movement, in 1970.

This year's theme or campaign is "Protect Our Species".

And the goals of the campaign are to:

- Educate and raise awareness about the accelerating rate of extinction of millions of species and the causes and consequences of this phenomenon.
- Achieve major policy victories that protect broad groups of species as well as individual species and their habitats.
- Build and activate a global movement that embraces nature and its values.
- Encourage individual actions such as adopting plant based diet and stopping pesticide and herbicide use.

As the campaign organisers are at pains to highlight:

- (i) We are amidst the largest period of species extinction in the last 60 million years.
- (ii) Habitat destruction—in the past 200 years we have seen 75% of our Australian native habitats destroyed or degraded by human activity—exploitation, and climate change are driving the loss of half of the world's wild animal population.
- (iii) Forty percent of the world's bird species are in decline, and 1 in 8 is threatened with global extinction.
- (iv) Worldwide bee populations are in decline, including the honey bee and many wild native bees.

On all this, and others, the available data is multilayered and complicated. While existing studies may not be perfect, for a host of environmental factors, we would still be wise to heed the warnings contained in those studies.

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Science is the grand narrative we construct to make meaning out of the mystery of existence. In the world of science, the most widely accepted modern estimate of the Earth's age is approximately 4.5 billion years. While the universe—that whole “complex, interrelated and interacting... matter-energy in space-time... of which humans are an integral part...” (*Gillette 2006*) is approximately 13.7 billion years old, give or take a month or two.

Such science has enabled us to look further and further back into the history of that universe, so much so, we have been able to write the story of its emergence to within a few seconds of the beginning.

As part of that Epic of Evolution story is an important emerging ‘doctrine of incarnation’... Yes, ‘incarnation’, that suggests not that the holy became human in one place at one time to convey a special message to a single chosen people, “but that the universe itself is continually incarnating itself in microbes and maples, in humming birds and human beings, constantly inviting us to tease out the revelation contained in stars and atoms and every living thing.” (*Bumbaugh 2003*)

Karl Peters, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy and Religion, and former President of the Centre for Advanced Study of Religion and Science, also writes: “Our planet, its life forms, and our own bodies contain the oxygen, nitrogen, carbon, iron, and other elements from earlier exploding stars. We are ‘star stuff’ a part of the matter that was created earlier in the universe's history.” (*Peters 2002*)

Let me put all this in some sort of context, be it much simplified. (*Shore 2006*) If we imagine the beginning of the universe took place at year zero on a 100-year time scale, with 100 being the present, then it was at about year 67 when our solar system formed.

By year 70 the oceans were filling, and the first cells developed at around year 72. A couple years later, cells learned how to photosynthesise, and then made oxygen like crazy for over a decade.

Sexual reproduction happened only in the last ten years. The dinosaurs, and their extinction, just three years ago.

Human Beings - where the *sapiens* in *homo sapiens* means ‘having wisdom’ - in the last 24 hours.

We weren't born yesterday. We were born *today*!

Our very existence, as Karl Peters says, is enmeshed with the processes deep in the hearts of the stars. In a very real sense we are made of stardust.

“The heat of our bodies is the heat of stars, tempered to the uses of life. The salt in our blood and in our tears is the salt of ancient oceans, encapsulated and carried with us, generation upon generation, into strange and distant places and circumstances. The past is not dead. It lives in us even now. The evolutionary universe, the ancient environment, the emergence of complex life—all are recapitulated in every moment of our existence.” (*Bumbaugh 2003*)

Now what Peters and others are talking about, is the ‘forgotten alternative’ to neo-conservative ‘theistic’ religion, called Religious Naturalism.

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Just home from post graduate studies in Germany - the year was 1931 - and still shaping his ‘mystical naturalism’, American empirical theologian Bernard Meland wrote:

“Have you ever communed in the first person with this total wealth of living life about you? Have you ever stood with awe and wonder before the unbounded totality of all reality—this ongoing process we call the universe, feeling your own intimacy with all its life, thrilling with the realisation of the magnitude of that relationship, relating you to all the world’s life, past, present and future? If you have, you have experienced first-hand religion.” (*Meland 1931*)

Meland suggests, as did Einstein before him, the natural world has the capacity to inspire a response—an expression of our awe of nature, of our attraction to the mystery of existence, to something intangible—called ‘religious’ or ‘spiritual’ from humans.

But any celebration of Earth Day, if it is to be honest, needs both the voice of the rational—to keep any community free from sloppy sentimentality—
as well as the concern of the creative artist
—the rich, deep, not entirely rational forms of expression shaped by metaphor, the poetic, myth and parable—to strike a chord and resonate within.

As I have been reminded by the first of my Bazilian colleagues today, Rubem Alves:

“...it is a mistake to believe that scientific discovery occurs by a simple process of accumulation of facts objectively described, without the aid of imagination.”

(*Rubem Alves 1969:166*)

Enter National Book Award recipient and Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, Mary Oliver (1935 - 2019). Well, her poetry. Because Mary Oliver, aged 83, died this past January.

Why **her** poetry?

Because her poetry is of the greatest help to all those trying to articulate

“a meaningful religious naturalism in an age and culture where belief in the metaphysical god (and gods) of old continues to leach slowly away.” (*Brown 2019*)

In a rare radio interview Oliver gave in 2015 she was asked about ‘attention’ - a theme that runs through her work.

She said:

“...attention without feeling is only a report... You need empathy... rather than just reporting. Reporting is for field guides. And they’re great. But they’re not thought provokers... Attention is the beginning of devotion.” (*Tippett 2019*)

One of her poems which has always touched me greatly,
and which reflects both her attention to detail shaped by empathy, is her “The Summer Day”.
Regarded as possibly her most well known,
I offer it now for your consideration...

*Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean—
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down,
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.*

*I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life? (Oliver 1992)*

Oliver's poems invite all of us to see how we are able
“to play a positive, purposeful, meaningful, and prayerful part in the fluxes and flows of
nature out of which we are ourselves made and it is in being able to see this that we can
be transformed in the face of complacency and/or despair”. (Brown 2019)
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Now a story from my second Brazilian... a professor of natural philosophy
and professor of physics and astronomy, Marcelo Gleiser.

Gleiser had just finished attending a conference in Durham UK
and decided to take a walk around the city, with its magnificent castle
and well-preserved eleventh-century Gothic cathedral—a true medieval jewel.

He writes:

“A public footpath meanders along the river. I approach it through a narrow alleyway
just beneath the castle. A huge sycamore bowed ceremoniously over the dark green
water. I paused to appreciate the view, infused with a deep sense of peace. A cloud of
mayflies wobbled just above the current, joyfully celebrating their twenty-four-hour
existence. Suddenly out of the depths, a salmon leaped some three feet into the air,
swallowed one of them, and dived back with a noisy splash. The fish must have been at
least six pounds, maybe more. I just stood there, motionless, mouth agape.

“If there are such things as signs, this was one. Nature had just sent me a message; at
least that's how I saw it, which is what matters. Few moments in my life had been more
meaningful. A cozy warmth spread across my chest, as I experienced a kind of
revelatory awakening. I had just witnessed the simple beauty of the unexpected. ‘You

need to get out into the wilderness more often. You're missing the magic,' said a voice in my head. This time, I was listening." (*Gleiser 2016*)

Listening and paying attention. But where might we start personally?
Start by taking a three year old child, maybe your grandson or grand daughter,
for a walk along some wet-lands track—mosquitoes permitting!

Do not plan to be in a hurry.
Every twig. Every coloured stone.
Every duck. Every small grasshopper or lizard to cross your path
will be an occasion for closer 'looking' and excitement.
Such is the enchantment of a three year old for the natural world.

Start with your own life.
With the 37.2 trillion cells of your body that are converting energy
to make protein right now so you can hear these words.

Or... with the awareness that the body you are carrying around now
—an "original, impermanent compound of disappearingly smaller parts" (*Fleischman 2013*)—
won't be the body you'll be carrying around one, three, five years from now.
Some claim it will have completely rebuilt itself from the inside out.

If you want to know where the environment is, just feel yourself,
suggests religious philosopher Jerome Stone...
"That is where the environment is. The skin is not a wall around us. The skin,
the lungs, the digestive tract are permeable membranes designed to let the
environment in. So we ignore the environment at our peril." (*Stone 1998*)

Allow yourself to be shaped by this creativity. This wonder.
Webs of culture, life, and cosmos, resulting in
unending successions of ever-evolving levels of living forms.

Each day lifts its head from the dew-strung grasses
and offers new hope, new possibilities, extra chances.
Because every moment is pregnant with possibility.

The miracle of each moment awaits our sensual wonder.
Hosannah! Not in the highest, but right here. Right now. This.
Horizontal transcendence. (*Goodenough 1998*)
Nature embedded in humanity.
Humanity embedded in nature.

It's Earth Day.
Pay attention! Listen! Ask questions!
Experience! Imagine! Love!
Then you will have woven wonder.

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